



DERECH B'YAM HATALMUD



AN ELUCIDATION OF TOPICS IN

**MEGILLAS ESTHER
FROM
MEGILLAH DAF 13A
INCLUDING:**

**WAS ESTHER REALLY GREEN?
HOW DID SHE KEEP KOSHER IN THE PALACE?**

L'ilui Nishmas Luba Baila bas Yisrael

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Based on 70 Questions & Answers on Megillas Esther by the author

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SECTION ONE



Mordechai Arrives in Persia

OVERVIEW

The Gemara on Megillah 13a analyzes numerous verses from Megillas Esther. It quotes Rava who learns that Mordechai chose to go into exile on his own. The commentators discuss how Rava sees this in the verses of Megillas Esther, and explain why Mordechai chose to do so.

מראה מקומות

- גמרא מס' מגילה דף יג. מ-"אשר הגלה" עד "שגלה מעצמו"
- הרי"ף על העין יעקב (מגילה יג. ד"ה "אשר הגלה...")
- עיון יעקב על העין יעקב (מגילה יג. ד"ה "אמר רבה שגלה מעצמו...")
- בן יהוידע (יג. ד"ה "אמר רבא שגלה מעצמו")

Summary of the Gemara

"אשר הגלה מירושלים" – The Gemara on Megillah 13a elucidates the words from Megillas Esther which relate that Mordechai "had been exiled from Yerushalayim."

(The verses read, "There was a Jewish man in Shushan the capital whose name was Mordechai ... who had been exiled from Yerushalayim along with the exiled [Jews] who had been exiled with Yechoniyah the king of Yehudah" [Esther 2:5-6]).

אמר רבא – The Gemara quotes Rava who teaches: שגלה מעצמו – Mordechai was exiled on his own.

QUESTION: How does רבא know that Mordechai decided to go into exile on his own?

Rashi ("ד"ה "שגלה מעצמו") says: it is apparent from the verse that Mordechai went into exile willingly, since it does not say, "אשר היה מן הגולה אשר הגלתה", which would mean, "he was among the exiles who were exiled." Rather it says, "אשר הגלה מירושלים עם הגולה" – "אשר הגלתה" – "who had been exiled from Yerushalayim with the exiles who were exiled."

Rashi says that this indicates that Mordechai was not like the other Jews, **שגלה על כרחן** – who were exiled against their will. Rather, **הוא גלה מעצמו** – he exiled himself.

Tosefos ("ד"ה "אשר הגלה שגלה מעצמו") says similarly, that the verse does not say, "הוגלה" – he was (passively) exiled. This indicates that he chose to go into exile on his own.

QUESTION: Why did Mordechai choose exile in Bavel over remaining in Eretz Yisrael, and where do we see a precedent for this in the Torah?

Background Information: Nevuchadnezar, the king of Bavel (Babylonia), conquered Eretz Yisrael four times. He only destroyed the Beis HaMikdash during his final invasion. During his third conquest, he exiled Yechoniyah, the king of Yehudah, to Bavel. At that time, he also brought **החרש והמסגר** – the leaders of the nation – with him to Bavel. He left the majority of the Jews in Eretz Yisrael, only exiling them eleven years later when he destroyed the Beis HaMikdash.

Even though Mordechai was not among the Jewish leaders forced into exile with Yechoniyah, he decided to willingly join them.

The **Ri"f** on ("ד"ה "אשר הגלה...") writes: Nevuchadnezar exiled many of the members of the Sanhedrin. Mordechai did not want to separate from his contemporaries, so he chose to follow them into exile where he could continue to learn with them. This a fulfillment of the words of **Pirke Avos**, "exile yourself to a place of Torah" (4:14).

The **Iyun Yaacov** on ("ד"ה "אמר רבה שגלה מעצמו...") suggests that Mordechai decided to accompany the Jews so that he could rebuke them when needed, and also to protect them. Mordechai perceived that the Jews would be threatened in Persia by Haman, and that he alone had the ability to save them.

The **Ben Ish Chai** in ("ד"ה "אמר רבא שגלה מעצמו") says that because Mordechai decided to willingly accompany the Jews into exile and join them in their suffering, he was rewarded **מדה כנגד מדה** – measure for measure – that he became the person who would redeem them from their suffering.

The Ben Ish Chai says in ("ד"ה "אמר רבא דגלה מעצמו") that when Mordechai joined the Jews in exile, he was following the example of Moshe Rabbeinu who similarly went out to see the suffering of the Jewish people in Egypt and assisted them in their burdens.

SECTION TWO



Was Esther Really Green?

OVERVIEW

The Gemara on 13a brings five explanations of Esther's name. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korchah says that her name Hadassah indicates that her skin was the color ירקרוקת. What color is this, and how did she gain this appearance? Further, did the color enhance or diminish her beauty?

מראה מקומות

- גמרא מס' מגילה דף יג. מ- "ויהי אומן את הדסה" עד "וחוט של חסד משוך עליה"
- רש"י (ד"ה "ירקרוקת היתה")
- רש"י (ד"ה "אלא חוט של חסד...")
- משנה נגעים יא:ד וברטנורה (ד"ה "ירקרק") ותפארת ישראל (כב)
- בן יהוידע (מגילה יג. ד"ה "אמר רבא שגלה מעצמו")

Summary of the Gemara

The Gemara on 13a continues and describes the relationship between Mordechai and Esther:

"ויהי אומן את הדסה (היא אסתר)" – "And he (Mordechai) had raised Hadassah (who is Esther)" (2:7).

קרי ליה הדסה וקרי לה אסתר – The Gemara notes that she is called both Hadassah and Esther. (Which is her real name?)

תניא – The Gemara quotes a Baraisa which brings five approaches to explain the meaning of her two names and which was her primary name:

"רבי מאיר אומר "אסתר שמה ולמה נקרא שמא הדסה" – First, it quotes **Rebbi Meir** who teaches, "her name was Esther. Why was she called Hadassah?"

"על שם הצדיקים שנקראו הדסים" – "Because the righteous are called Hadassim – willows."

"וכן הוא אומר "והוא עומד בין ההדסים" – He brings a verse to support this explanation – "he (the angel Michael) was standing among the hadassim (referring to the righteous of the generation)" (Zechariah 1:8).

רבי יהודה אומר "הדסה שמה ולמה נקראת שמה אסתר" – Next it quotes **Rebbi Yehudah** who argues. He says that her real name was Hadassah. Why was she called Esther? "על שם שהיתה מסתרת דבריה" – Because she hid the facts of her origins.

-(According to this explanation, Esther's name come from the root סתר – hidden).

שנאמר – He quotes the verse from the Megillah, "אין אסתר מגדת את עמה" – "Esther did not reveal her nation" (2:20).

רבי נחמיה אומר – Third, the Gemara quotes **Rebbi Nechemiah** who teaches that her actual name was Hadassah, but she was called Esther because, "שהיו אומות העולם קורין אותה על שום אסתהר" – the nations of the world said that she was as beautiful as the moon.

בן עזאי אומר – Fourth, it quotes **Ben Azzai** who teaches that her name was Esther, but she was called Hadassah because "לא ארוכה ולא קצרה היתה" – she was neither tall nor short – "אלא בינונית כהדסה" – but of medium height like a Hadassah.

ר' יהושע בן קרחה אומר – Fifth, the Gemara quotes **Rebbi Yehoshua ben Korchah** who says, "אסתר ירקרוקת היתה" – "Esther was green," "וחוט של חסד משוך עליה" – "and a thread of kindness was drawn over her."

-**Rashi** ("ד"ה "אלא חוט של חסד...") says that Hashem bestowed this on Esther to cause her to appear beautiful to the nations and to Achashveirosh.

Understanding the statement that "Esther was green"

Several questions need to be resolved to understand this statement regarding the color of Esther's skin, including:

QUESTION: What is the meaning of ירקרוקת? Was Esther literally green, or does this refer to a different color?

QUESTION: How did Esther gain this color?

It is necessary to first define the term ירקרוקת. The commentators disagree on its meaning.

Rashi ("ד"ה "ירקרוקת היתה") says Esther's color was כהדסה זו – like this hadassah (which is green).

The **Bartenura** to יא:ד says similarly, that the color ירקרק is, “the greenest of the greens.” (The double letters in the word indicate its intensity.) The **Tiferes Yisrael** there agrees and even defines the word in Hebrew letters as "גריין" – “Green.”

The **Vilna Gaon** on נו:ד argues and says that it is incorrect to define ירקרוקת as “dark green” for two reasons. First, he says that this color is called "ככרת" – like a leek (and not ירקרוקת). Second, he says that this color does not occur in people.

Rather the Vilna Gaon says that ירקרוקת mean זהב – yellow gold.

(See also **Tosefos** in [ד"ה "הירוק ככרת"] who discusses how the term ירוק is defined in various places in the Gemara.)

QUESTION: Did the color of Esther's skin enhance her beauty or detract from it?

Just as there is a difference in opinion regarding Esther's color, there is a disagreement about the impact that it had on her beauty.

The **Vilna Gaon** on Esther 2:16 says that Esther was naturally beautiful, but she turned the color ירקרוקת due to her immense pain and anguish that she felt at being taken against her will to Achashveirosh. Hashem gave her the חוט של חסד to offset her yellow color and bring out her innate beauty (on Esther 2:16).

The **Ben Ish Chai** in (יג. ד"ה "אמר רבא שגלה מעצמו") differs. He holds that even though Esther's skin color was a shade of green, it enhanced her beauty. He says that her skin radiated an enchanting glow like a precious stone. This was the source of her חן – the grace which entranced everyone who saw her. Hashem gave her additional חן to cause her beauty to surpass that of Vashti, whom the Gemara lists as one of the most beautiful women in history (to. דף טו.).

Esther's color also caused her to be fit to be the queen. The Ben Ish Chai notes that the gematria of ירק is 310. However Esther was ירקרוקת, indicating a double degree of the color. In addition, the numerical value of ירקרוקת is 620, which is equal to כתר – crown, showing that she was fit for the royal throne (to יג).

The Ben Ish Chai in ("...קן ירוק...") (חגיגה יב. ד"ה "קן ירוק...") also explains that ירק is the color of royalty, based on Esther's color.

QUESTION: Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korchah says that Esther's skin was the color ירקרוקת, and that she received a חוט של חסד – a thread of kindness. How does he know this?

The **Vilna Gaon** explains: the Gemara in the first perek of Bava Basra 15a discusses the story of Iyov and brings several opinions concerning when he lived. The same **Rebbi Yehoshua ben Korchah** there says that Iyov lived during the time of Achashveirosh.

He learns this because a verse in sefer Iyov says that "it was impossible to find women more beautiful than the daughters of Iyov in all of the world" (42:15). Since the verse specifically mentions their beauty, it must be indicating that this was an especially valued commodity during their lifetime. Therefore he says that Iyov lived during the time of the Purim story, when the physical beauty of women was valued to an unprecedented degree.

But if Iyov's daughters were truly the most beautiful women in the world, one of them should have been chosen to be Achashveirosh's queen. Why was Esther chosen instead?

The Vilna Gaon says that this is how Rebbi Yehoshua ben Korchah knows that Hashem bestowed a חוט של חסד on Esther. This enhanced her beauty to overcome her unsightly color. It also helped her to be chosen by Achashveirosh in place of all the other women, especially over the daughters of Iyov.

(This explanation is quoted in the name of the **Vilna Gaon** in **Sh'nos Eliyahu** – Bikkurim. In another sefer, the Vilna Gaon is quoted as bringing this explanation in the name of **Rabbi Eliezer Avlei**, the Av Beis Din of Vilna.)

SECTION THREE



How did Esther Keep Kosher in the Palace?

OVERVIEW

The Gemara discusses the relationship between Mordechai and Esther before discussing practical details of her life in the palace.

Esther was in the public's eye as queen for many years. She attended state functions and hosted gatherings for Achashveirosh and for the wives of government officials. How did she maintain her commitment to the rules of kashrut without anyone noticing? How do we remember her dedication today?

מראה מקומות

- גמרא מס' מגילה דף יג. מ- "כי אין לה אב ואם" עד "ונותן להם זרעונים"
- בן יהוידע (ד"ה "שהאכילה מאכל יהודי")
- רש"י (ד"ה "קתלי דחזירי")
- תוס' (ד"ה "קדלי דחזירי")
- בן יהוידע (ד"ה "ושמאול אמר...")

Summary of the Gemara

The Gemara continues and describes Esther's adoption by Mordechai:

It questions the meaning of the verse in the Megillah which teaches that Mordechai adopted her, "כי אין לה אב ואם" – "because she did not have a father and a mother" (2:7).

למה לי "ובמות אביה ואמה" – The Gemara asks why is it necessary for the verse to continue and say that Esther's parents died. (This is obvious from the phrase, "she did not have a father and a mother.")

אמר רב אחא – *The Gemara answers: "עיברתה מת אביה" – "Esther's father died while her mother was pregnant with her." "ילדתה מתה אמה" – "after she was born, her mother died."*

-**Rashi** ("...ואמה") says that the verse is teaching that Esther did not have parents for even a single day of her life.

(This verse also says that Mordechai and Esther were first cousins, since she was **בת דדו** – the daughter of his uncle [his father's brother].)

"ובמות אביה ואמה לקחה מרדכי לו לבת" – *The Megillah continues and says, "And it was from the death of her father and her mother that Mordechai took her to him to be a daughter."*

תנא משום רבי מאיר – *The Gemara brings a Baraisa which quotes **Rebbi Meir** who says: "אל תקרי לבת אלא לבית" – the verse should not be read that Mordechai took Esther to be "a daughter," but "he took her to be his house (meaning, to be his wife)."*

The Gemara brings a proof that the word "בת" can mean "בית":

וכן הוא אומר "ולרש... תשכב" – *The Gemara brings a verse from sefer Shmuel which brings a story of a poor man who had a single sheep which he raised as a member of his family.*

-This is a parable of a rich man who stole the single sheep of a poor man. The rich man is Dovid HaMelech, who married Batsheva, the wife (sheep) of the poor man Uriah HaHitti after he died in battle.

"ותהי לו כבת" – *"And she was like a daughter to him."*

משום דבחקו תשכב הוות ליה (כבת) – *The Gemara asks: does the fact that the sheep laid in his chest caused her to be like a daughter to him? אלא כבית – Rather this means she was like his home. הכי נמי לבית – So too, Mordechai took Esther to be like his home, meaning as his wife.*

Esther's life in the palace

The Gemara describes elements of Esther's daily life in the palace.

"ואת שבע הנערות וגו'" – *The Gemara quotes the verse, "and seven maidservants" (2:9).*

אמר רבא "שהיתה מונה בהן ימי שבת" – *The Gemara quotes **Rava** who explains that Esther counted the days of the week through her maidservants.*

-**Rashi** ("ד"ה שהיתה מונה בהן...") says that Esther assigned one maidservant to work for her each day of the week on a fixed schedule. She knew when the one designated to work on Shabbos arrived that the day was Shabbos.

The **Targum Sheni** on the verse says that Esther called each servant girl by a specific name, based on an event which had occurred during the creation of the world on the day she worked.

What did Esther eat in the palace?

Summary of the Gemara

The Gemara continues its analysis of the verses in Megillas Esther:

"וישנה ואת נעורתי וגו'" – *The Gemara quotes the second half of verse 2:9 which teaches, "and he (Hegai) changed her and her maids" (meaning that he did a special favor for them).*

The Gemara understands that the favor alluded to in the verse is in reference to a special food which Esther and her maidservants were served.¹ The Rabbis differ on the particular meaning of the verse:

Rav says that Hegai, "fed her Jewish (Kosher) food."

Shmuel says that she was fed קדלי דחזירי – fatty hog bacon.

Rebbi Yochanan says that Hegai fed her זרעונים – seeds.

וכן הוא אומר – *He quotes a verse from Doniel 1:16 which records, "the servant ... brought them seeds."*

-**Rashi** ("ד"ה "וכן הוא אומר") says that seeds are beneficial for the righteous to help them avoid eating non-Kosher food.

Several questions need to be answered to understand the three opinions regarding the food which Esther ate in the palace, including:

QUESTION: Since no one knew that Esther was Jewish, why does Rav say that she was fed Kosher food? How would Hegai have known to feed her this? (If she requested it, this would have made her origins obvious.)

¹ The Targum says that the maidservants were also righteous women and so only ate Kosher food.

The **Ben Yehoyadah** ("ד"ה "שהאכילה מאכל יהודי") says that people knew that Esther had grown up in Mordechai's house, because it was known that she was taken from there to the palace. They assumed that he had discovered her as an infant abandoned in the marketplace and adopted her.

Because Esther had been accustomed to eating only kosher food while growing up in Mordechai's house, Hegai was concerned that changing her diet would diminish her beauty. Therefore, he continued to provide it.

Alternatively, he says that Hegai served her meat with a proper shechita. He assumed that because it had been checked for any health problems, it was healthier to eat. (The Ben Yehoyadah says that in his time, many non-Jews in Europe and even some members of the royalty had the practice of only eating meat which had a proper shechita, as they assumed that it was healthier.)

QUESTION: How can we understand the opinion that Esther ate bacon?

The commentators differ on the meaning of Shmuel's words.

Rashi ("ד"ה "קתלי דחזירי") says that she ate bacon, **ומתוך אונסה לא נענשה** – but she did so out of duress. Therefore, she was not punished for this.

Tosefos ("ד"ה "קדלי דחזירי") argues and says: **הש ושלום** – heaven forbid! She would not have eaten this food (even if forced to do so).

If so, what did she eat according to Tosefos?

The **Mitzpeh Eisan** ("תוס' ד"ה "קתלי דחזירי") says that Tosefos agrees with the **Aruch** who identifies the food as **קדלי דחזירי** – the tops (i.e. the heads) of lettuce." The Mitzpeh Eisan says that this was a delicacy eaten by government officials.

The **Ben Yehoyadah** ("ד"ה "ושמאול אמר...") suggests a different approach. He says that the food was not pork but was instead the brain of the Shabuta fish. It is kosher and has a similar taste to pork. Plus, it enhances the beauty of those who eat it.

(The Ben Yehoyadah brings another explanation from the **Arizal** that Mordechai and Esther had created a **sheidah** – a female demon – which resembled her and fulfilled her marital obligations with Achashveirosh. The Ben Yehoyadah and the Megillas Sesarim say that Esther was indeed fed non-kosher food, but that the sheidah ate it for her.)

QUESTION: Why does Rabbi Yochanan say that Esther was fed seeds? What is the relevance of the verse which he brings as a support?

QUESTION: How do we recall today that Esther ate seeds?

Background Information: Nevuchadnezar brought the four adolescents Doniel, Chanayah, Mishael and Azaryah to Bavel, and trained them to be his advisors. They were supposed to be served a carefully-planned diet of non-kosher meat to help them grow. The verse from Doniel indicates that instead of eating the non-kosher meat, the four boys entreated the official in charge of their food to provide them with only seeds. Even on this diet, they appeared healthier than the other young men who ate the more nourishing meat.

Megillas Sesarim on the Megillah says that similarly, when Esther was fed only seeds in the palace, her beauty and healthy appearance miraculously remained.

(Doniel was alive at the time of the Purim story and was serving as an advisor to the king and then to Esther. He may have given her the idea of eating seeds.)

In remembrance of this, some people observe the custom of eating seeds on Purim night. The **Levush** says it is learned from the explanation of Rebbi Yochanan.

It is also possible that Hamantaschen have their origin in the poppy seeds that Esther, Doniel and the other Jews ate in the palace. (The word may be a combination of the words “Mohn Taschen,” meaning “pockets of poppy seeds.”)

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